



# Montgomery County Council

*From the Office of Councilmember Nancy Floreen*

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**For Immediate Release**

**May 6, 2003**

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**STATEMENT OF NANCY FLOREEN  
ON TRANSPORTATION FUNDING  
May 6, 2003**

Today the Council takes up the issue of funding to address one of the County's most critical needs: transportation. Today is not about contentious items. It is not about- the ICC or the Purple Line. Today is about facing up to the demands of a woefully underfunded transportation network - or lack thereof – and its effects on Montgomery County's quality of life.

Traffic congestion has reached an all-time high in this County. It pervades our lives: Major arteries act more like parking lots. Commuting times are lengthening. Neighborhoods are burdened by cut-through drivers desperate to reach their destination. Time-starved drivers fail to stop for pedestrians. Fire trucks and ambulances are forced to extremes to cope with traffic-clogged streets on their way to emergency sites. You heard our new Acting Health Officer tell us this morning that congestion and its products are more of a threat to our residents' health than SARS.

We've all experienced it; Council and Committee meetings have started late because one of us is stuck in traffic. Yesterday, closing a gate at the Bethesda Naval Hospital backed up commuter traffic through North Bethesda, the Beltway spur and onto I-270, and will continue to be a major problem for the next two weeks. A simple thing like that has thrown thousands of residents' days off kilter. They have no road alternatives.

The costs to community, business and government are staggering. On our agenda this morning was the office of Legislative Oversight report noting that congestion has reduced fuel efficiency for our school buses. In other words, just like everyone else, County government is spending more just to carry out the ordinary business of transporting children to our schools.

The traffic is so bad that it has sparked creative marketing campaigns for County businesses. "Stress causes contractions; avoid the Beltway," shouts an ad for maternity services in the Upcounty.

*Washington Post* columnist Michael Kinsley recently noted that "Driving to work on crowded highways is the typical voter's main experience of government in (more...)

page two

everyday life, and it is increasingly unpleasant.” He asked rhetorically, “What could the government do for you, Mr. or Ms. Middle-Class Voter, to make your life concretely better? ‘Concretely’ is the word, because the best answer is: Solve the traffic problem.”

Like several of my colleagues, I can attest personally that the voters care deeply about ending the gridlock that’s paralyzing our County. Our challenge is to move ahead on long-overdue transportation and transit projects despite the extraordinary budget difficulties we confront.

Our problems are self-evident. As a result, you would think that this budget would be easy, a no-brainer. I ran for the Council because of my strong concerns about policy. The math has been unexpected.

The difficulty of our task has increased enormously thanks to actions at the State level. The Governor gutted the State transportation budget by three-quarters of a billion dollars. He slashed the County’s share of highway user fees by one-third. And he’s threatening to veto the vehicle registration surcharge that would yield \$18.3 million this year dedicated to transportation.

The real-world impact of all this is devastating. The Governor’s derailment of highway user fees threatens basic functions of government – like road resurfacing projects, the purchase of new buses powered by natural gas, and pedestrian education. Our ability to serve existing communities, especially those hard hit after the snow havoc of the winter, our strong desire to increase mass transit capacity and to reduce air pollution are all significantly harmed. This Governor’s actions are jeopardizing the safety of County walkers, bikers and drivers alike.

Despite these huge cuts by the Governor, I remain committed to moving forward on needed transit and transportation projects. Quite simply, if we don’t dedicate adequate funding for facility planning now, we won’t break ground on a single project to increase road capacity over the next four years – nor will we move ahead on long-overdue transit centers. This is unacceptable. If we don’t plant the seeds today, these essential transportation and transit projects won’t begin to come to fruition over the next four years.

We all heard the Council President say that this is a “share the pain” budget, in which every County program is “on the table” for reduction or elimination. We need to fund the essential services that our residents need and expect, without imposing a tax burden too heavy for them to shoulder. Our most vulnerable residents need services; County employees deserve fair compensation; our public schools require support.

But in this “share the pain” environment, I’d like to point out that every single County resident is sharing the pain of traffic congestion every day. While 25 percent of county taxpayers have children in the public school system, 100 percent are dependent on safe and efficient travel through the county. Even my elderly father, whose only travel is in wheelchair mode, is dependent upon healthcare workers who are in turn dependent on a functional network of roads and transit to get to his side.

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page three

Every county resident, child, and employee is paying the price in less time at home and more stress when on the road. We must honor our commitment to those residents. We must get back on track. We must start cutting through the gridlock that is paralyzing our communities. In light of the Governor's actions to date, we know we cannot move the Go Montgomery program forward as proposed. I continue to hope that our ability to impose a vehicle registration surcharge to fund transportation initiatives will make it through this month intact. There is a long list of essential projects -- \$18 million worth -- we will simply not be able to fund without that source of revenue. Projects such as Father Hurley Boulevard, the purchase of 7 additional buses, the construction of Chapman Avenue and Goshen Road are some of what would be funded if the Governor does not veto the vehicle registration surcharge. Without that funding, we cannot sustain a dedicated transportation fund.

At the end of the day, however, I will not allow a political vendetta to curtail our residents' ability to drive, bike or take mass transit. And I urge my colleagues to join me in this effort.

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